Rural Young Adults' Perceptions of Cannabis: A Survey Study

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Abstract

This project examines rural young adults' perceptions of cannabis (marijuana). The results of a paper-and-pencil and an online survey yielded four major findings. The research findings show the associations between exposure to social media messages about cannabis, moral foundations, perceived risks of cannabis, attitudes toward cannabis legalization, and word of mouth intentions to talk about cannabis in person and online. Data analysis suggests that young adults' attitudes toward recreational cannabis and cannabis legalization are not predicted by time spent on social media, but are associated with specific moral foundations. The research findings show that health educators may consider embedding latent moral values in their drug-prevention campaigns that target rural young adults.

Theoretical Background

Project overview

Cannabis is the most commonly used federally illegal drug in the United States (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2021), and public opinion on it has been rapidly evolving in recent years (Carliner et al., 2017). While existing health communication research has generated novel insights into cannabis-related attitudes, norms, and behaviors of various demographic segments, including adolescents (Thrash & Warner, 2019), high school students (Palamar, 2014), college students (Earle et al., 2020), and older adults (Arora et al., 2020), little is known about rural young adults' perceptions of cannabis, even though they are more likely to engage in risky behaviors (Gupta & Petti, 2022; Lambert et al., 2008). This study aimed to reveal rural young adults' attitudes toward regarding cannabis.

Moral Foundations Theory (MFT)

Built upon virtual theories and cultural psychology (Haidt & Joseph, 2004), the MFT is consisted of five universal foundations to explain the moral intuitions that shape individuals' reactions to ethical dilemmas (Haidt & Joseph, 2004), attitudes toward social issues (Haidt & Graham, 2007), and behaviors (Hopp et al., 2021). The five foundations are **Care/Harm**, **Fairness/Reciprocity**, **Ingroup/Loyalty**, **Authority/Respect**, and **Purity/Sanctity**.

Moral foundations shape one's "fast, automatic gut-reactions of like and dislike when certain patterns are perceived in the social world, which in turn guide judgements of right and wrong" (Koleva et al., 2012, p.185). This study applies the MFT theory to a controversial health communication topic, young adults' perceptions of cannabis.

Methods

Paper-and-pencil survey
- 123 responses from WT students

Online survey
- 462 valid responses from *Qualtrics*

Major independent variables	Survey question examples
Exposure to social media messages that support recreational cannabis	How often you have been exposed to messages that support recreational cannabis in the past 30 days on Twitter?
Exposure to social media messages that are against recreational cannabis	How often you have been exposed to messages that support recreational cannabis in the past 30 days on YouTube?
Moral foundation: Care/Harm	"…Whether or not someone suffered emotionally"
Moral foundation: Fairness/Reciprocity	"…Whether or not some people were treated differently from others"
Moral foundation: Ingroup/Loyalty	"…Whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group"
Moral foundation: Authority/Respect	"…Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority"
Moral foundation: Purity/Sanctity	"… Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency"

Major dependent variables	Survey question examples
Perceived risks of cannabis	How much do people risk harming themselves physically and in other ways when they use recreational cannabis once a month?
Attitudes toward recreational cannabis	"Regardless of my current state law, I am in favor of legalized cannabis for recreational use."
Attitudes toward cannabis legalization	"I support the personal use of cannabis being made legal."
Word of mouth intentions	"…talk about recreational cannabis to others in person"
Social media word of mouth intentions	"…talk about recreational cannabis on social media sites such as Twitter"

Results and Discussion

- Demographic variables, including age, gender, ethnicity, and whether or not cannabis is legalized in their state of residence, do not predict young adults' attitudes toward recreational cannabis. There is a weak correlation between gender and perceived risks of cannabis use, such that females perceive the risks of regular cannabis use higher than males.
- While time spent on social media does not predict one's attitude toward recreational cannabis, cannabis legalization, or perceived risks of cannabis use, exposure to social media content about cannabis plays a role in shaping one's perceptions of cannabis. Both exposure to pro-cannabis and against-cannabis content are associated with higher supportive attitudes toward cannabis legalization, but the association between exposure to pro-cannabis content and supportive attitudes toward cannabis legalization is stronger than that between exposure to against-cannabis content and supporting cannabis legalization.
- Three moral foundations, Care/Harm, Ingroup/Loyalty, and Authority/Respect, are associated with higher perceived risks of cannabis use. In other words, young adults who are sensitive to cruelty and harm, who have strong social emotions related to recognizing and trusting members of their own social groups, and who respect and obey authorities are likely to think that regular cannabis use leads to higher health risks. Two other moral foundations, including Fairness/Reciprocity and Purity/Sanctity, are not associated with perceived risks.
- Two moral foundations, Ingroup/Loyalty and Authority/Respect, are negatively associated with attitudes toward cannabis. Young adults who have strong social emotions related to recognizing and trusting members of their own social groups and those who respect and obey authorities tend to develop negative attitudes toward cannabis use.
- Exposure to social media content about cannabis, either pro- or against-cannabis, is associated with young adults' stronger word-of-mouth intentions to talk about cannabis in person and online.
- Four moral foundations, Care/Harm, Fairness/Reciprocity, Ingroup/Loyalty, and Authority/Respect, are associated with supportive attitudes toward cannabis legalization.
- Overall, young adults' attitudes toward recreational cannabis use are neutral toward to negative end, their perceived risks of regular cannabis are moderate toward the high end, but they demonstrate a high level of support of cannabis legalization. Their word-of-mouth intentions to talk to others about cannabis are moderate toward the high end both in person and online.

References

Available upon request.

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